



# INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION KEY POLICIES SINCE INDEPENDENCE AND SUGGESTED REFORMS IN TERM OF GLOBAL COMPETATINESS

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolution and impact of key policies on India's higher education sector since its independence in 1947, with a focus on global competitiveness. India's higher education system has undergone significant reforms aimed at addressing challenges such as educational access, quality, and alignment with national development goals. The Radhakrishnan Commission (1948-49) laid the foundation for university education, emphasizing coordination and funding. The Kothari Commission (1964-66) further advanced these reforms, advocating for qualitative improvements, expansion, and alignment with national goals. The National Policy on Education (1968) sought to equalize educational opportunities, integrate regional disparities, and enhance science and research education. Subsequent efforts, such as the Committee on Higher Education (2009) chaired by Prof. Yash Pal, identified critical issues like low enrollment rates and fragmentation of the system, which hindered the sector's growth. This study also explores suggested reforms to enhance India's global competitiveness, focusing on improving infrastructure, increasing public spending on education, and promoting research and innovation. As global educational standards rise, India must address these challenges to produce a highly skilled and globally competitive workforce. The study concludes with policy recommendations to enhance the effectiveness and global standing of India's higher education system, ensuring it meets both national and international needs in the 21st century.

**KEYWORDS:** Indian Higher Education, Policies, Global Competitiveness, ODL

## INTRODUCTION

At the time of India's independence in 1947, the nation's education system was in dire need of reform. With only 17 universities and 636 colleges serving approximately 2.38 lakh students, the challenges were stark. The literacy rate was a mere 14%, and education expenditure accounted for less than 0.5% of the national income (Naik, 1947). In this context, the role of education in fostering national development and social progress was recognized as pivotal for India's future. Vision of educators like Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and others, sought to build an educational system that would not only expand access but also improve quality, reflecting India's rich cultural heritage while addressing the demands of an increasingly globalized world.

To overcome these challenges and lay the foundation for a robust education system, successive commissions and policies have played crucial roles in shaping India's higher education landscape. The University Education Commission (1948-49) and the Kothari Commission (1964-66) were among the first major initiatives to introduce reforms that focused on improving the quality, accessibility, and relevance of higher education in post-independence India. This led to the formulation of the National Policy on Education in 1968, which emphasized national integration, equal educational opportunities, and a focus on science and research (Agarwal, 2006 ; Sen, 2016)

As India moved into the era of economic liberalization and globalization, the higher education sector underwent significant transformations. Policies such as the National Policy on Education (1986) and the National Knowledge Commission

(2005) sought to enhance the sector's global competitiveness, addressing issues like accessibility, quality, and relevance. More recently, the National Education Policy (2020) aims to make India's higher education system more flexible, inclusive, and globally competitive (Aithal, & Aithal, 2019 ; Aithal, & Aithal, 2020).

In the present study it is worked out to examine the evolution of India's higher education policies, from post-independence reforms to contemporary shifts. In this study efforts were also made to discusses the challenges and suggests reforms that can enhance India's global competitiveness in the higher education sector, preparing the nation to meet the demands of the 21st century knowledge economy.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

At the time of India's independence in 1947, the nation's education system was underdeveloped, with only 17 universities and 636 colleges serving approximately 238,000 students. The literacy rate was low, around 14%, and education expenditure was less than 0.5% of the national income (Naik, 1947). The underdeveloped higher education infrastructure and low literacy rate posed significant challenges for the newly independent nation. However, India quickly recognized the importance of education in national development and social progress. The education policies that followed sought to create a robust higher education system capable of addressing the emerging demands of modernization, innovation, and global competitiveness. The evolution of higher education policies can be categorized into distinct phases: the post-independence

foundational phase (1947-1985), economic liberalization and expansion phase (1986-2005), globalization and reform phase (2005-2019), and contemporary transformation phase (2020-2024) (Borthakur et al., 2024).

### 1. Post-Independence Foundational Phase (1947-1985)

Following independence, India sought to reform its higher education system to move away from its colonial legacy and create a system that would address the country's diverse and evolving needs. The early efforts were focused on increasing accessibility, improving the quality of education, and fostering national integration (Altbach, 2009).

#### 1.1 University Education Commission (1948-49)

Chaired by Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the University Education Commission (1948-49) was the first significant reform of the post-independence education system. This commission proposed several recommendations for improving the quality and accessibility of university education in India. Key recommendations included:

- Transforming universities from merely affiliating bodies to teaching institutions.
- Establishing rural universities focused on agriculture and industry.
- Promoting the use of regional languages in education alongside English.
- Enhancing research and professional education in fields such as medicine, engineering, and law.
- Strengthening faculty development and autonomy in universities.

The creation of the University Grants Commission (UGC) in 1956 was a direct result of the commission's recommendations, aimed at coordinating and funding higher education.

#### 1.2 Education Commission (1964-66)

The Indian higher education sector has undergone significant changes since independence, with various policy initiatives aiming to address the evolving educational needs of the nation. One of the most seminal contributions in this regard came from Dr. Daulat Singh Kothari, who chaired the Education Commission (1964-66). The Commission's report, often referred to as the Kothari Commission Report, was pivotal in shaping the framework of higher education in India. The Commission emphasized the need for a national system of education that would be inclusive, egalitarian, and aligned with the country's developmental goals. It called for uniformity in educational standards across the country, advocating for the establishment of institutions of higher learning in different regions to promote accessibility (Kothari, 1966). Furthermore, the Kothari Commission emphasized the need to develop a curriculum that integrated science, technology, and social sciences, with a focus on fostering critical thinking and research capabilities among students. However, despite these ambitious recommendations, there were noticeable gaps both in global and local contexts (Khan, S., & Kotharkar, 2012).

On a global scale, the Indian higher education system has struggled to keep pace with the rapidly changing dynamics of

globalization, technological advancements, and the increasing demand for skills in emerging sectors. Many Indian universities still face challenges regarding quality, infrastructure, and global rankings, falling behind their global counterparts. Locally, issues of regional disparities, outdated curricula, and a lack of emphasis on research and innovation persist (Dahlman and Utz, 2005). To address these gaps, it is essential to implement reforms that align Indian higher education with global trends. These include the introduction of more flexible and interdisciplinary curricula, increased investment in research and development, fostering collaboration with international institutions, and enhancing industry-academia linkages to ensure that graduates are equipped with the skills needed in a competitive global economy (Chauhan, 2020). Furthermore, a focus on improving faculty training, modernizing educational infrastructure, and creating a supportive ecosystem for startups and innovation will be crucial in enhancing the sector's global competitiveness (Rosienkiewicz et al., 2024).

#### 1.3 National Policy on Education, 1968

The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1968 marked a significant milestone in the development of India's educational framework, setting the stage for the expansion and modernization of higher education in the post-independence period (Singh, 2023). The policy emphasized the need for expanding educational access, improving quality, and promoting national integration. It sought to create an educational system that would promote social justice, equality, and national development (Tikly and Barrett, 2011). Key features of the NPE 1968 included a focus on improving the quality of teaching, promoting vocational education, and ensuring a more equitable distribution of educational resources across regions (Government of India, 1968). The policy also recommended the establishment of new universities and institutions of higher learning to cater to the growing demand for higher education and to bridge regional disparities. Additionally, it stressed the importance of providing scholarships, grants, and financial aid to students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

However, despite these positive intentions, the NPE 1968 identified several gaps, particularly in the context of global and local trends. On a global scale, India's higher education system continued to lag behind its counterparts in developed nations, particularly in terms of research output, innovation, and internationalization (Singh, 2017). The emphasis on rote learning and outdated curricula meant that students were not equipped with the skills needed to thrive in a rapidly globalizing and competitive world. Locally, regional imbalances persisted, with certain states and areas continuing to face significant challenges in terms of access and quality of education. Furthermore, the policy did not adequately address the growing need for an industry-academia collaboration or the integration of technology in teaching and learning, both of which are central to global educational trends today (Gupta, 2019 ; Li, 2019).

To address these gaps, the reform agenda for the Indian higher education system must focus on creating a more flexible and dynamic curriculum that aligns with global industry needs,

encourages research and innovation, and fosters international collaborations. Additionally, more investment in infrastructure, digitalization, and faculty development is necessary to enhance quality and ensure that Indian universities are able to compete globally. Strengthening public-private partnerships and enhancing entrepreneurial education can also contribute to improving global competitiveness. These reforms, aligned with global trends, would help bridge the gap between India's higher education system and the evolving global standards (Rathore, 2020 ; Aithal and Maiya, 2023).

## 2. Economic Liberalization and Expansion Phase (1986-2005)

The period between 1986 and 2005 in India's higher education sector witnessed significant changes, largely due to the economic liberalization that began in 1991. This era, often referred to as the "Economic Liberalization and Expansion Phase," marked a shift from a state-controlled economy to one more open to global markets, influencing the education system in profound ways. The key features of this period included the expansion of higher education institutions, increased private sector participation, and the introduction of new fields of study such as business administration, information technology, and engineering, which were seen as crucial to supporting the growing economy (Sharma, 2006 ; Kotwal et al., 2011). Notably, the establishment of institutes like the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) and the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) began to receive greater international recognition, while private universities also began to emerge as major players. The policy framework during this time also saw an emphasis on technological advancements, with programs designed to meet the demands of a rapidly globalizing job market (Krishna and Patra, 2015).

However, despite these advances, several gaps remained both in global and local contexts. On a global scale, India's higher education sector was still lagging in international rankings, struggling with issues such as outdated curricula, limited research output, and insufficient investment in infrastructure. Indian universities, despite their strong technical programs, were not consistently attracting international students or establishing the level of research collaboration seen in top global universities. Locally, the system faced challenges of inequity, with access to quality education still limited by regional disparities, caste, and socio-economic factors. The growing privatization of education during this period also led to a rise in educational inequality, as many private institutions were often expensive and catered only to a small segment of the population (Bhandari, 2008 ; Varghese and Khare, 2021).

In terms of reforms, to better align with global trends, India's higher education sector needs to focus on enhancing the research capabilities of its institutions through increased funding and international collaboration. Curriculum reforms should prioritize interdisciplinary learning, innovation, and critical thinking rather than rote memorization. Furthermore, there is a need for greater integration of emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and digital platforms in both teaching and administrative processes. Strengthening global partnerships,

improving faculty quality through regular training, and encouraging private-public partnerships to address regional imbalances would also help raise India's global competitiveness. Finally, policies aimed at ensuring affordability and accessibility across all socio-economic backgrounds is crucial to fostering an equitable higher education system (Rath, 2011; Achieng and Mlitwa, 2024).

### 2.1 National Policy on Education, 1986

The National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1986 was a landmark development in India's educational landscape, marking a shift toward improving the quality, accessibility, and relevance of education in the country. This policy emphasized the need for a more inclusive, participatory approach to education and sought to address regional disparities in educational opportunities. A key feature of the NPE 1986 was its focus on quality improvement in higher education, including the modernization of curriculum, improvement in teacher training, and expansion of institutions to meet the growing demand for higher education (Government of India, 1986). It also introduced measures aimed at promoting vocational education and emphasized the importance of technology in learning, which was becoming increasingly critical in a globalizing world. The policy recognized the need for research and development and encouraged universities to adopt more scientific and technology-driven approaches. Furthermore, the policy aimed to integrate education with economic and social development by aligning higher education with the nation's broader development goals (Cope and Ward, 2002).

However, despite these significant advancements, the NPE 1986 highlighted several gaps, particularly when viewed in the context of global and local trends. On the global front, while India made strides toward improving access to higher education, its universities remained relatively weak in global rankings, struggling with issues like outdated curricula, a lack of innovation, and low research output. Indian institutions were also falling behind in attracting international students and forming international collaborations, which were becoming increasingly central to global competitiveness (Wildavsky, 2012 ; Chauhan, 2020). Locally, the policy's goals of inclusivity and equity faced challenges due to disparities in regional educational infrastructure, the rising cost of education, and persistent socio-economic barriers that limited access for disadvantaged groups. Additionally, the policy did not adequately address the role of private institutions or the rapidly evolving digital education landscape, which had become critical in the years following its implementation (Douglass and Edelstein, 2009 ; Singh, 2018).

To address these gaps and align with global trends, reforms in India's higher education system must focus on enhancing research capacity through increased funding, fostering global partnerships, and encouraging innovation. Curricula should be updated to reflect emerging fields such as artificial intelligence, climate change, and digital humanities, ensuring that students are equipped with skills necessary for the global job market. Strengthening industry-academia collaboration is also crucial for improving employability and bridging the gap between education and market needs. Furthermore, expanding access



to higher education through digital platforms and promoting inclusive education policies for marginalized communities will be vital in ensuring that India's higher education sector remains globally competitive and equitable (Rathore, 2020 ; Aithal, and Maiya, 2023).

### 3. Globalization and Reform Phase (2005-2019)

The period between 2005 and 2019 in India's higher education sector was characterized by the forces of globalization and significant reforms aimed at aligning the Indian education system with global standards. This era saw the introduction of several key policies and initiatives aimed at expanding access, improving quality, and enhancing the global competitiveness of India's higher education institutions. The National Knowledge Commission (2005) and the Higher Education Funding Agency (HEFA) (2017) were key components of this phase, focusing on expanding institutional capacity, improving infrastructure, and boosting research funding. The introduction of the Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA) in 2013 aimed at improving the quality of state universities, while the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) (2015) sought to create a transparent, competitive environment among universities. During this phase, India also saw increased private sector participation in higher education, and institutions began focusing more on global partnerships, research output, and internationalization to compete in the global academic and job market (Government of India, 2017) (Wadia and Shamsu, 2021).

However, despite these advancements, several gaps remained both globally and locally. Globally, while India's higher education institutions made strides in some areas, such as research output and global partnerships, they still struggled to make a significant impact in international rankings (Altbach et al., 2019). The country's universities continued to face challenges in developing a robust research culture, achieving high levels of innovation, and integrating interdisciplinary learning approaches. Furthermore, while private institutions grew rapidly, concerns around quality control and the affordability of education remained, exacerbating educational inequalities (Chakrabarti, 2019). Locally, the rapid expansion of higher education institutions during this period led to an imbalance in quality, as many institutions, especially in rural and remote areas, continued to suffer from inadequate resources and outdated curricula. Additionally, regional disparities in access to quality education persisted, with elite institutions concentrated in urban areas, leaving a large section of the population without equal opportunities (Goddard and Puukka, 2008; Mishra, 2018).

To address these gaps and ensure India's higher education sector remains globally competitive, several reforms are necessary. First, a stronger focus on research and development is essential, with increased funding for universities to foster innovation and produce world-class research. Universities should also embrace more interdisciplinary curricula that are aligned with global trends, integrating emerging fields such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, and sustainability. Furthermore, increasing the internationalization of India's higher education system by attracting foreign students, faculty, and research partnerships

will be crucial. Strengthening the accreditation system, ensuring quality standards across both public and private institutions, and expanding digital and distance education offerings will help improve accessibility and affordability. Lastly, greater efforts to reduce regional disparities, improve faculty quality, and create inclusive learning environments will be key to making India's higher education system globally competitive and equitable (Kapur & Mehta, 2019 ; Jha, 2025).

#### 3.1 National Knowledge Commission (2005)

The National Knowledge Commission (NKC), established in 2005, was a pivotal moment in India's higher education policy landscape, aimed at transforming India into a knowledge-based society and enhancing the global competitiveness of its higher education system. Chaired by Dr. Sam Pitroda, the NKC's key recommendations included improving the quality and quantity of higher education institutions, fostering innovation, and increasing investments in research and development. One of the significant recommendations was the creation of more world-class institutions that would promote research, interdisciplinary learning, and technological advancements. Additionally, the NKC advocated for the autonomy of institutions, the decentralization of educational governance, and the introduction of a system to encourage the collaboration between academia, industry, and government for knowledge creation and dissemination (National Knowledge Commission, 2006). The Commission also emphasized the importance of creating a culture of innovation and enhancing India's global rankings by strengthening research capabilities and improving faculty quality. Moreover, it recommended the introduction of new learning models, including digital platforms and e-learning, to make education more accessible and globally competitive (Mukherjee and Sharma, 2015).

Despite these ambitious goals, several gaps in the policy's implementation were identified in both global and local contexts. On the global front, India's higher education institutions still struggled to compete with leading global universities in terms of research output, international partnerships, and faculty expertise. Indian universities, despite their strong technical programs, lagged behind in global rankings, primarily due to limited research funding, outdated curricula, and insufficient collaboration with top international institutions (Ghosh, 2011; Wildavsky, 2012). Locally, while the NKC highlighted the need for expanding access to quality higher education, regional disparities and socio-economic barriers remained significant obstacles. The growing demand for higher education was not matched by a corresponding increase in high-quality institutions, especially in rural and underserved regions. Additionally, the policy did not adequately address the issues of privatization in education, which led to rising costs and exacerbated inequalities (Desai, 2012 ; Clifford et al., 2013).

To address these gaps and enhance global competitiveness, reforms are needed to increase funding for research and development, particularly in cutting-edge fields such as artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and renewable energy (Kumar et al., 2025). Encouraging international collaborations, both in research and faculty exchange, would help improve the global

standing of Indian universities (Varghese, 2022). Moreover, the focus on innovation should extend beyond technical education to include entrepreneurship, social sciences, and humanities, fostering a more diverse and interdisciplinary approach to higher education. Strengthening the regulatory framework for private institutions, ensuring quality control, and making education more affordable and accessible to all segments of the population will be critical to reducing local disparities. Additionally, greater investment in digital education infrastructure will be necessary to reach underserved regions and enhance India's global standing in higher education (Chakrabarti, 2019 ; Aithal and Maiya, 2023).

### 3.2 Committee on Higher Education (2009)

The Committee on Higher Education (2009), chaired by Prof. Yash Pal, was established to address the challenges facing India's higher education sector and propose reforms to improve its quality and global competitiveness. The committee's report highlighted the need for a holistic reform in the higher education system, emphasizing the importance of creativity, critical thinking, and innovation in academic processes. One of the key features of the Committee's recommendations was the restructuring of India's higher education system to shift from a rigid, examination-based system to one that encourages flexibility, interdisciplinary learning, and student-centered pedagogy. The committee also stressed the importance of academic autonomy for institutions, suggesting that universities should have greater freedom in their curriculum design and governance. Furthermore, it recommended greater investment in infrastructure, particularly in rural and remote areas, to bridge regional disparities and improve access to quality education (Yash Pal Committee, 2009; Kaiser and Barstow, 2022).

Despite these significant recommendations, several gaps in the policy's implementation were identified both globally and locally. On the global front, while the committee's vision for a more flexible, student-oriented education system was timely, it did not adequately address the challenges of India's low research output and limited global partnerships (Kelly, 2023). Indian universities still struggled to compete with global counterparts in terms of research quality, faculty expertise, and international recognition. In addition, while some universities made progress in adopting modern, interdisciplinary curricula, many institutions continued to operate within outdated frameworks that were misaligned with global trends in education, such as the increasing focus on technology-driven learning and global collaboration (Sundararajan, 2016 ; Lattuca, 2001). Locally, the implementation of these recommendations faced significant barriers, including resistance from entrenched administrative structures, limited funding for infrastructure development, and ongoing issues of access and inequality in education. While the committee emphasized the need for inclusivity, regional disparities in educational quality and access continued to persist, leaving many students from rural and economically disadvantaged backgrounds at a disadvantage (Kapur & Mehta, 2019 ; Brown, 2005).

To address these gaps and enhance global competitiveness, reforms should focus on increasing research funding, especially

in emerging fields like artificial intelligence, renewable energy, and digital humanities. Moreover, fostering international academic partnerships and encouraging collaborative research with leading global universities will help Indian institutions improve their research output and global rankings. Curriculum reforms should continue to focus on interdisciplinarity and the integration of technology in learning, preparing students for the challenges of a rapidly evolving global job market. Strengthening the accreditation system, improving faculty development, and ensuring greater investment in digital infrastructure will also be crucial in raising the overall quality of education in India. Finally, addressing regional disparities through targeted policies and making education more affordable and accessible for all socio-economic groups will ensure that the higher education system remains equitable and globally competitive (Ghosh, 2020).

### 4. Contemporary Transformation Phase (2020-Present)

The Contemporary Transformation Phase (2020-Present) in India's higher education sector is characterized by rapid digitalization, increased focus on global competitiveness, and a reimagining of educational frameworks in response to emerging global challenges. In this phase, significant policy initiatives like the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 have laid the groundwork for systemic reforms. The NEP emphasizes multidisciplinary education, greater integration of technology in teaching and learning, and the importance of research and innovation as key drivers of national development. It also promotes the use of digital platforms for inclusive learning, aiming to improve access to quality education for students in remote areas. The policy seeks to improve the employability of graduates through skill development programs, and it envisions a more globally integrated higher education system by encouraging partnerships with international universities and facilitating the mobility of students and faculty. Furthermore, there is a push toward establishing world-class institutions and increasing public and private investment in research and development (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Despite these forward-looking reforms, there are several gaps both on a global and local scale. On the global front, while India's higher education system is striving for greater global integration, it continues to lag behind top global institutions in key areas such as research funding, global rankings, and faculty qualifications. While some institutions are embracing digital learning and interdisciplinary approaches, there is still a significant gap in the quality of online education, and the research output remains limited compared to global leaders (Chakrabarti, 2021). Locally, challenges such as regional disparities, inadequate infrastructure, and socio-economic inequalities persist, preventing equitable access to high-quality education. The implementation of the NEP, though ambitious, faces resistance from traditional educational structures, and there is a pressing need for substantial investment in faculty training, digital infrastructure, and student support systems to realize its full potential. Furthermore, while the policy promotes private sector participation, the unregulated growth of private institutions has led to concerns regarding the quality of education, high tuition fees, and the commercialization of

education, which can exacerbate educational inequalities (Rao, 2022).

To address these gaps and align with global trends, India's higher education sector must focus on increasing investment in research and development to improve global research output and foster innovation. Strengthening international collaborations and academic mobility will help raise the global standing of Indian institutions. Additionally, reforms should focus on ensuring that the transition to digital education is accompanied by quality assurance mechanisms to maintain high educational standards. Providing more targeted financial support for students from underprivileged backgrounds, enhancing faculty development programs, and focusing on interdisciplinary curricula will help improve accessibility, quality, and global competitiveness. Finally, increasing transparency in the accreditation process and regulating the growth of private institutions will be critical to ensure the quality of education remains high while addressing affordability and equity concerns (Kapur, 2020).

#### 4.1 National Education Policy, 2020

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, a landmark initiative by the Government of India, aims to transform the higher education sector by focusing on accessibility, inclusivity, and global competitiveness. The key features of the NEP 2020 include the promotion of a multidisciplinary approach to learning, greater emphasis on critical thinking, research, and innovation, and the integration of technology in education. One of its significant provisions is the introduction of a 5+3+3+4 curricular structure, aiming to increase flexibility and interdisciplinary learning across different stages of education. The policy also focuses on enhancing the quality of education through accreditation systems, setting up world-class institutions, and promoting international partnerships. Additionally, the NEP stresses the importance of skill development, encouraging lifelong learning, and addressing the socio-economic disparities in access to education (Ministry of Education, 2020). Furthermore, the policy emphasizes the need to expand online and digital education, which has gained prominence, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring education continues in a more inclusive and flexible manner.

Despite its progressive outlook, several gaps in the NEP's implementation are visible both on the global and local fronts. Globally, while the NEP aims to improve India's position in international rankings, India's higher education system still struggles with low research output, limited innovation, and insufficient international collaborations compared to leading global institutions (Chakrabarti, 2021). The quality of faculty remains a concern, as India lacks enough highly qualified and internationally recognized faculty members. Additionally, the absence of substantial funding for research in many institutions undermines the policy's goal of enhancing innovation. Locally, the implementation of the NEP faces significant challenges, particularly in rural and underserved areas where educational infrastructure remains inadequate. Although the policy emphasizes the inclusion of underprivileged sections of society, economic and social disparities continue to limit access to

quality higher education. The rapid shift to online and digital education, while necessary, has also exposed the digital divide, where students from low-income backgrounds lack access to the necessary resources, such as high-speed internet and digital devices (Kapur & Mehta, 2021).

To bridge these gaps and improve India's global competitiveness, reforms should focus on increasing public and private investment in research and development to foster innovation and improve India's research standing globally. There should be a concerted effort to attract global faculty and researchers through competitive compensation and research opportunities. Strengthening the internationalization of Indian institutions by promoting faculty and student exchange programs and forming global research networks will help increase India's presence on the global academic map. On a local level, targeted interventions are necessary to enhance infrastructure in rural and remote areas, ensuring equitable access to education. Addressing the digital divide through initiatives that provide affordable internet and digital devices to students in underserved areas will ensure that the transition to online education benefits all sections of society. Finally, creating robust mechanisms for monitoring and ensuring the quality of private institutions and promoting affordable education will be essential to maintaining equity and improving educational standards across the country (Rao, 2022).

#### 5. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Components in India

The Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system has emerged as an essential component of India's higher education landscape, especially for reaching out to non-traditional students, including working professionals, housewives, and those in remote areas. The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), established in 1985, was a pioneering institution in promoting ODL in India. With over 3 million students, IGNOU offers a wide range of undergraduate, postgraduate, diploma, and certificate courses, helping to bridge the gap in access to education for people who cannot attend conventional brick-and-mortar institutions. Additionally, the role of state-level open universities further facilitates this mode of learning, ensuring that education is more accessible across diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

In recent years, ODL has gained increasing recognition as a viable and scalable solution for India's higher education sector. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 envisions enhancing ODL programs by leveraging technology, aiming to provide flexible learning opportunities for students. The integration of technology in ODL is crucial for its growth and competitiveness. With innovations in e-learning platforms, MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), and virtual classrooms, ODL has the potential to address the challenges of access, affordability, and quality in India's higher education system. Open and online learning formats can make higher education more inclusive and cater to the needs of a digital-savvy population, thus contributing to the nation's global competitiveness in education (Prakash, 2021).

##### 5.1 Evolution of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Policies in India



The evolution of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in India has been marked by progressive steps in policy development, particularly in the context of widening access to higher education. The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), established in 1985, laid the foundation for ODL in India, aiming to provide education to those who could not attend traditional institutions due to geographical, economic, or social barriers. The early policies primarily focused on the creation of institutional frameworks for ODL, ensuring broad outreach through flexible learning options. The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 (revised in 1992) also acknowledged ODL as a means to increase access to higher education and alleviate pressure on traditional institutions.

In the 21st century, technological advancements have driven the modernization of ODL. The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) and the University Grants Commission (UGC) played significant roles in accrediting distance education programs to ensure quality assurance. The introduction of Swayam in 2017, an initiative by the Government of India, further solidified the digitalization of ODL through the offering of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and online degrees. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 also recognized ODL as a critical element for India's educational growth, aiming to expand it further by utilizing emerging technologies, providing more opportunities for lifelong learning, and addressing the learning needs of diverse populations.

### 5.2 Gaps in ODL Policies

Despite its promising growth, several gaps persist in India's ODL policies that hinder its full potential. One significant gap is the quality assurance of ODL programs. While accreditation mechanisms exist, there is a lack of uniform standards and consistency in the assessment of distance education programs across institutions. These results in variations in the quality of education offered, with some programs failing to meet global standards. Another major gap is the limited access to technological infrastructure, particularly in rural areas. The reliance on digital platforms in ODL programs has excluded large segments of the population due to limited internet connectivity, outdated infrastructure, or lack of digital literacy. Moreover, there is a lack of interaction between students and faculty, which can impact the learning experience, making it harder for students to receive timely feedback and personalized support (Rangou, 2017).

Another issue is the lack of integration between traditional and distance learning systems. Although both modes of education operate in parallel, there is minimal collaboration, leading to an ineffective academic ecosystem. Additionally, recognition of ODL qualifications by industries and employers remains a challenge. Many employers continue to favor traditional educational credentials over ODL qualifications, undermining the credibility of distance learning program (Ralston, 2021).

There is a growing need for an independent and separate regulatory framework for Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in India, distinct from the traditional higher education system.

While the existing regulatory bodies, such as the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the National Board of Accreditation (NBA), oversee both conventional and distance learning programs, the unique characteristics of ODL require specialized attention. The diverse nature of distance learning, which often includes online platforms, blended learning models, and large-scale open courses, necessitates a tailored approach to regulation. An independent regulatory framework for ODL would ensure the development of specific guidelines for accreditation, curriculum standards, assessment methods, and quality assurance, all while addressing the distinctive challenges faced by distance learners, such as limited face-to-face interaction and digital divide issues. This framework could help streamline the recognition of qualifications from ODL programs, provide consistent quality across institutions, and improve global competitiveness by aligning with international standards in distance education. Furthermore, such a regulatory body could oversee the development of innovative practices in distance learning, driving the sector forward in a more structured and effective manner. By addressing the unique needs of ODL, India could better harness the potential of this mode of education to expand access to higher education for a broader range of learners (Bordoloi, 2018).

### 6. Review of Literature:

The Indian higher education sector has undergone significant transformation since the country gained independence in 1947. Over the decades, various policies have shaped the trajectory of the sector, aiming to expand access, enhance quality, and address emerging global challenges. Scholars have extensively examined these policies and have proposed reforms to boost India's global competitiveness in the higher education arena.

The Education Commission (1964-66), chaired by Dr. Daulat Singh Kothari, was one of the first significant efforts to shape the higher education system in India post-independence. The Commission's report focused on developing a balanced education system, stressing the importance of science, technology, and research. According to Krishnan (2010), the Commission emphasized the need for universities to adopt a more flexible, dynamic approach to curriculum and teaching, while also addressing regional disparities in educational infrastructure. However, Chauhan (2012) argues that while the policy goals were progressive, their implementation faced challenges such as inadequate funding and outdated teaching methodologies, limiting the competitiveness of Indian institutions globally.

The National Policy on Education (1968) was another milestone, emphasizing the expansion of access to higher education, particularly for marginalized and underprivileged communities. This policy aimed to increase the number of educational institutions and improve the quality of education. Sengupta (2015) highlights that while the policy helped in expanding higher education, it failed to address the structural issues of quality and research, which hindered India's universities from competing with global counterparts. Desai (2018) notes that the policy's focus on expanding infrastructure without commensurate improvements in the curriculum or

faculty quality led to a widening gap in global rankings between Indian institutions and those in developed countries.

The period following India's economic liberalization in 1991 saw a phase of significant expansion and growth in higher education. The National Policy on Education (1986) aimed at modernizing the system, introducing reforms in curriculum, encouraging vocational education, and improving research output. Rathore (2019) observes that this phase saw increased private sector participation, which led to more institutions being established. However, Kapur & Mehta (2019) argue that the liberalization process led to a proliferation of private institutions that were often under-regulated, which led to concerns about the quality of education and widening socio-economic inequalities in access to higher education.

The National Knowledge Commission (NKC), established in 2005, focused on reforming the higher education sector to enhance India's global competitiveness. The NKC's recommendations, as discussed by Ghosh (2010), included strengthening research, improving faculty quality, and fostering international collaborations. Despite these recommendations, Rao (2016) suggests that the policy failed to address key issues such as the insufficient funding for research and development and the lack of a robust framework for faculty development. This hindered Indian institutions from achieving a prominent place in global academic rankings.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a contemporary transformation phase for higher education in India. As noted by Chakrabarti (2021), the NEP emphasizes a holistic, multidisciplinary approach to education, integrating technology into the curriculum, and expanding access to higher education for underprivileged communities. Kapur (2020) underscores that the policy also aims to improve the quality of education by focusing on research, innovation, and global partnerships. However, Sundararajan (2021) argues that the challenges of digital infrastructure and regional disparities continue to limit the reach and effectiveness of these reforms, particularly in rural areas.

Despite the policy advancements, Indian higher education institutions continue to face significant challenges in global rankings. Desai (2012) emphasizes that while India has made progress in expanding access, it still lags in areas like research output, innovation, and faculty quality. According to Chakrabarti (2021), Indian institutions must focus on increasing research funding, improving teaching methodologies, and fostering global collaborations to enhance their competitiveness on the world stage. Moreover, Rathore (2019) suggests that greater investments in faculty development and interdisciplinary research are critical to ensuring that Indian institutions can keep pace with global academic trends.

In conclusion, the literature highlights both the progress and the challenges India has faced in its journey toward a globally competitive higher education system. While significant strides have been made, there is a clear need for continuous reforms, particularly in the areas of research, faculty quality, and access

to education, to enable Indian higher education institutions to compete effectively on the global stage.

## 7. Methodology:

This research adopts a qualitative methodology based on a systematic review of secondary data, including government reports, scholarly articles, policy documents, and international reports, to analyze the evolution of India's higher education policies and their impact on global competitiveness. The study follows a systematic literature review approach, focusing on key policies such as the Kothari Commission (1964-66), National Policy on Education (1968), National Knowledge Commission (2005), and the National Education Policy (2020). The analysis utilizes qualitative content analysis techniques, including thematic and comparative analysis, to identify the key provisions of these policies, assess their implementation challenges, and compare India's progress with global trends in higher education. The study also critically examines gaps in areas such as research output, faculty development, and technological integration, while proposing reforms to address these issues and enhance India's global competitiveness. Limitations of the study include reliance on secondary data, the absence of primary data from stakeholders, and the complexities of global ranking systems. The findings will offer policy recommendations aimed at improving research funding, faculty quality, global collaborations, and access to education in underserved regions.

## 8. Analysis of Key Policies and Their Impact

The Kothari Commission (1964-66) laid the foundation for a comprehensive higher education system, calling for an expansion of access and equity. Its limitations were lack of emphasis on quality and research output. The National Policy on Education (1968) continued this focus on educational expansion and accessibility, emphasizing the need for standardization and reform at the national level. However, it failed to address integration with global standards and neglected the role of research and technology. National Knowledge Commission (2005), India began focusing more intently on the need for knowledge-based growth and higher education reform. It identified the importance of building research capacity and upgrading faculty quality, areas that remain crucial for India's competitive positioning. The policy also acknowledged the importance of international partnerships and collaborations, but its recommendations have not been fully realized, as evidenced by India's continued low global university rankings. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a significant shift, outlining an ambitious vision to elevate India's higher education sector. The policy emphasizes improving quality, fostering interdisciplinary learning, enhancing digital literacy, and expanding global collaborations. While NEP 2020 provides a roadmap for future development, its implementation faces several challenges, including regional disparities, funding limitations, and resistance from traditional institutions.

Key Challenges in India's Higher Education Sector are research output and innovation in which universities continue to lag behind global counterparts. Limited funding for research, lack of international collaborations, and outdated



curricula contribute to gap. Research initiatives often focus on incremental improvements rather than breakthrough innovations, hindering India's ability to become a global leader in research and development.

Faculty development also remains a major challenge. Shortage of qualified faculty, coupled with inadequate faculty development programs, continues to be a significant barrier to improving educational quality in India. Many faculty members are not equipped to engage in cutting-edge research or to deliver high-quality instruction, further contributing to India's

lower ranking in global higher education systems. The shift to online education exposed the inequities in access to digital infrastructure, particularly in rural areas. Limited internet connectivity and a lack of digital devices in underserved regions have made it difficult for students to access quality education. The rise of private institutions has led to an uneven distribution of quality education. While some private universities have made strides in improving infrastructure and research, many others lack the necessary resources and faculty to provide high-quality education, creating a significant disparity between institutions.

Policy	Key Features	Impact	Challenges/Limitations	Suggested Reforms
<b>Kothari Commission (1964-66)</b>	Focused on expansion of access and equity.	Laid the foundation for a comprehensive higher education system.	Lack of emphasis on quality and research output.	Shift focus to quality education and research capacity; encourage innovation and faculty development.
<b>National Policy on Education (1968)</b>	Continued focus on educational expansion and accessibility. Emphasized standardization and reform.	Expanded access to education; promoted regional equality.	Failed to integrate global standards; neglected research and technological development.	Strengthen global integration and increase research funding.
<b>National Knowledge Commission (2005)</b>	Focused on knowledge-based growth, enhancing research capacity, and faculty quality.	Began efforts to build research capacity and international collaborations.	Many recommendations were not fully realized, leading to continued low rankings in global higher education.	Increase funding for research, improve faculty quality, and foster international collaborations.
<b>National Education Policy (NEP) 2020</b>	Emphasizes quality improvement, interdisciplinary learning, digital literacy, and global collaborations.	Outlines a roadmap for improving higher education and global competitiveness.	Faces implementation challenges: regional disparities, limited funding, and resistance from traditional institutions.	Implement hybrid learning models, support interdisciplinary research, and strengthen digital infrastructure in underserved areas.

**Table 1: Analysis and summary on key policies, their impact, and the suggested reforms for India's higher education sector**

Key Challenges in India's Higher Education	Details	Impact on Global Competitiveness	Suggested Reforms
<b>Research Output &amp; Innovation</b>	Limited funding, lack of international collaborations, outdated curricula, and incremental research improvements.	Hinders India's ability to be a global leader in research and development.	Increase investment in R&D, foster public-private partnerships, focus on high-impact research.
<b>Faculty Development</b>	Shortage of qualified faculty and inadequate development programs.	Low quality of instruction and research, contributing to lower global rankings.	Strengthen faculty development programs, attract international faculty, and foster global collaborations.
<b>Digital Divide</b>	Uneven access to digital infrastructure, especially in rural areas.	Limited access to quality education, particularly in underserved regions.	Improve digital infrastructure, expand internet access, and implement NEP 2020's hybrid learning models.
<b>Uneven Distribution of Quality Education</b>	Growth of private institutions has led to significant disparities in infrastructure and resources between institutions.	Creates disparities in educational outcomes and global competitiveness.	Strengthen regulations for private institutions to ensure quality and equity in education.

**Table 2: Analysis and summary on Challenges in India's Higher Education, their impact, and the suggested reforms for India's higher education sector**

## 9. Discussion and Suggested reforms

### 9.1 Discussion:

India's higher education sector has evolved significantly since independence, marked by a series of key policies aimed at addressing the educational needs of a growing nation. These policies, including the Kothari Commission (1964-66), National Policy on Education (1968), National Knowledge Commission (2005), and the National Education Policy (2020), reflect the country's shifting priorities in response to social, economic, and global demands. The early policies focused on expanding access to education and addressing regional disparities, while later policies incorporated goals of quality improvement, research advancement, and global integration (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Despite these positive strides, significant challenges persist in India's higher education sector. Quality of education, faculty development, and research output remain major areas of concern, hindering the country's ability to compete globally. While India has made notable progress in expanding access to education, its institutions still lag behind top global universities in terms of research output and innovation (Chakrabarti, 2021). Indian universities' global rankings are consistently lower compared to those in developed countries, due to factors such as limited funding for research, outdated curriculum, and a lack of international collaboration (Rathore, 2019). Furthermore, the rising role of private institutions has led to an uneven distribution of educational opportunities, with many private institutions lacking the infrastructure, faculty, and resources to deliver quality education (Desai, 2012).

One of the most pressing issues is the digital divide, which has become more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. The shift to online education exposed gaps in digital access, especially in rural areas, limiting opportunities for many students (Kapur & Mehta, 2021). Another challenge is the quality of faculty, as many Indian universities still face a shortage of highly qualified professors, and faculty development programs are often inadequate (Ghosh, 2010).

### 9.2 Suggested Reforms:

To enhance India's global competitiveness, a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach, involving policy reforms at various levels of governance, is essential. The AIU's "Reimagining Indian Universities" and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 outline a strategic roadmap that aims to make Indian higher education institutions globally competitive. One key reform is increasing investment in research and development (R&D), as research quality directly influences a university's international standing. India must allocate more funds for research projects, enhance the number of research grants, and foster public-private partnerships to support innovation (Kapur, 2020). Faculty development programs should focus on improving both teaching quality and research capabilities, with a focus on attracting and retaining international talent by offering competitive salaries and research opportunities (Rathore, 2019). Global collaborations, such as faculty exchanges and international research partnerships, will significantly enhance expertise and contribute to the internationalization of Indian

education (Chakrabarti, 2021). In line with NEP 2020, the regulatory frameworks for private institutions should also be strengthened to ensure that they meet high academic and infrastructural standards (Desai, 2012).

Strengthening digital infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, is another critical reform. Expanding digital education infrastructure—reliable internet access, digital devices, and online platforms—will democratize access to quality education and align India with global trends in e-learning and digital content delivery (Sundararajan, 2021). NEP 2020 emphasizes digital literacy and the integration of technology in education, promoting hybrid learning models that blend online and offline education to enhance the learning experience. Furthermore, interdisciplinary education and research are increasingly vital in addressing the complex challenges of the modern world. According to Pawan Agarwal (2006), to thrive in a rapidly changing global environment, India's higher education system must encourage interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches that break down traditional academic silos. This shift is crucial for creating well-rounded graduates capable of contributing to emerging sectors like the white economy (healthcare), blue economy (ocean-based industries), and green economy (sustainable development and environmental protection). These sectors present vast opportunities for India to take the lead in innovative, high-impact research and development.

By building global collaborations, fostering interdisciplinary learning, and incorporating emerging fields such as the white, blue, and green economies, India can position its higher education sector as a leader in addressing the global challenges of the 21st century. Encouraging students to participate in entrepreneurship programs and startup incubators can further fuel innovation and develop a competitive, job-ready workforce (Sengupta, 2015). Additionally, in the realm of Open and Distance Learning (ODL), aligning India's programs with global standards such as the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) will increase their recognition worldwide. Integrating cutting-edge AI-based tutoring systems and other technological advancements into ODL will also enhance the quality of education, making India a competitive force in distance education. These reforms, coupled with standardized certification frameworks for ODL qualifications, will significantly bolster India's global academic standing, offering greater opportunities for Indian students and institutions on the world stage.

Suggested Reforms	Description
<b>Increase Investment in Research and Development (R&amp;D)</b>	Allocate more funds for research projects, enhance research grants, and foster public-private partnerships to support innovation. Research quality directly influences university rankings globally.

<b>Strengthen Faculty Development Programs</b>	Focus on improving faculty recruitment, retention, and development programs. Offer competitive salaries, research opportunities, and attract international talent. Global collaborations will enhance expertise.
<b>Enhance Digital Infrastructure</b>	Expand reliable internet access, digital devices, and online platforms, especially in rural areas. Implement hybrid learning models, aligning with global trends in e-learning and digital content delivery.
<b>Regulate Private Institutions</b>	Strengthen regulatory frameworks for private institutions to ensure uniform academic and infrastructural quality. Align with NEP 2020 standards to ensure high educational standards across all sectors.
<b>Foster Global Collaborations and Interdisciplinary Learning</b>	Encourage international partnerships, faculty exchanges, and interdisciplinary research to address complex global challenges. Collaboration with global universities will elevate academic expertise.
<b>Support Innovation and Entrepreneurship</b>	Promote entrepreneurship programs, establish startup incubators, and create innovation hubs within universities. Foster a job-ready, innovative workforce to lead in global markets.
<b>Standardize Open and Distance Learning (ODL)</b>	Align ODL programs with global standards like ECTS for international recognition. Incorporate AI-based tutoring systems and other technological advancements to enhance education and reach a global audience.
<b>Focus on Emerging Sectors</b>	Encourage research and education in sustainable development, healthcare, and ocean-based industries. Equip graduates to lead in these vital and emerging sectors through interdisciplinary approaches.

**Table 3: Suggested reforms emphasizing the multi-faceted approach to improving India's higher education system and enhancing its global competitiveness**

## CONCLUSION

India's higher education sector has undergone a remarkable transformation since independence, with policy initiatives aimed at expanding access, improving quality, and fostering global integration. From the foundational recommendations of the Kothari Commission (1964-66) to the recent National Education Policy (2020), the Indian government has strived to create an educational ecosystem that addresses the needs of a growing nation while aspiring to elevate the global standing of Indian universities. Despite these efforts, significant challenges persist, particularly in terms of global competitiveness. The expansion of access to higher education has been a notable success, with enrollment numbers at new heights. However, quality issues related to education, research output, and faculty development remain critical barriers to India's global competitiveness. Indian universities continue to rank low on international scales, with outdated curricula, insufficient research funding, and limited international collaborations contributing to this gap. Moreover, disparities between public

and private institutions, as well as the digital divide exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, underscore the need for robust digital infrastructure and equitable access to education.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 offers a comprehensive framework to address these challenges by promoting interdisciplinary education, increased research investment, and the internationalization of higher education. The AIU's "Reimagining Indian Universities" report further advocates for a dynamic transformation in higher education that emphasizes the need for multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary learning (Mittal and Pani, S2020). India's higher education system must evolve to include not only traditional disciplines but also emerging fields such as the white economy (healthcare), blue economy (ocean-based industries), and green economy (sustainability and environmental innovation). These areas are essential for addressing global challenges and positioning India as a leader in these critical sectors. The shift towards interdisciplinary education will better equip graduates to navigate complex global industries and contribute meaningfully to diverse sectors. The success of NEP 2020 will depend on its full implementation, requiring strong political will, public and private investment, and concerted efforts to modernize curricula, improve faculty quality, and build global partnerships.

For India to enhance its global competitiveness, investment in research, faculty development, digital infrastructure, and international collaborations must be prioritized. The government should continue its push for research excellence by increasing funding, fostering public-private partnerships, and creating innovation ecosystems in universities. Faculty development programs focusing on global trends and interdisciplinary research will attract international talent and ensure Indian universities remain competitive. Moreover, the quality of private institutions must be regulated with stringent standards to align with global benchmarks. Digital infrastructure must be enhanced, ensuring that both urban and rural students have access to high-quality education and online resources. Additionally, the promotion of entrepreneurial education and the support of startup incubators will foster innovation, preparing students for a rapidly changing job market.

India's higher education system must focus on not only expanding access but also ensuring that this education is of the highest quality and is globally competitive. The integration of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary learning, the embrace of emerging economies such as the green, blue, and white economies, and the strengthening of global research networks will ensure that India's universities not only serve local needs but also contribute to global trends. With the right reforms, India has the potential to become a global leader in education, attracting international talent, fostering innovation, and preparing graduates to lead both nationally and globally. By investing strategically in research, innovation, and international collaboration, India can elevate its higher education system to meet global challenges and stand as a beacon for educational excellence worldwide.



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